

cantata "Tanti strali al sen mi scocchi." Labelle delighted and impressed; Chance beguiled and convinced. But Mr. Chance really came into his own when he went solo, with songs from Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*, a masque drawn from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The first thing that struck you about these pieces was that Purcell's librettist was, well, not Shakespeare. The second was that Chance managed to make the songs sound almost as if they were by the Bard, by capturing Purcell's languorous evocation of nightfall precisely, and with startling conviction. I can't think offhand of a more thoughtful vocal performance I've heard in years; it was spellbinding.

The instrumental portions of the first half of the program were no less exciting (harpsichordist Maggie Cole performed with particularly tripping brilliance a little-known suite of dances from Handel). But these paled next to the intensity of the second half, which was given over to Pergolesi's famous *Stabat Mater*, his suite of songs that both depict and invoke the stricken Mary at the foot of the Cross. Here the purity of Labelle's tone was piercing - although we sensed her pushing her volume at times, just to show what she could do, as it were. Chance was more circumspect, but perhaps more actually devastating. The piece is itself simultaneously luminous and crushing, and somehow Labelle and Chance seemed to nearly embody this duality; it was hard to imagine a fuller evocation of its terrible vision.

Posted by Thomas Garvey at 9:12 AM

After intermission, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater" received a substantial vocal conception from both singers - sacred as it may be, Pergolesi's famous vision of Mary at the foot of the cross unfolds with the expressively lapidary drama of opera. Labelle unleashed full power in her first aria, "Cujus animam gementum"; Chance revealed ringing force in his final aria, "Fac ut portem." Lean, spectral tone was a choice rather than a stylistic stipulation, as in Labelle's reading of Pergolesi's wilting, gasping portrayal of Christ's death. What made the performance operatic wasn't just the dramatic necessity or even the more extroverted quality; it was the going for broke, singers and players exchanging precision mapping for risky adventure. The landscape's big enough for both.
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HUB REVIEW February 9, 2009

Boston seems all but hypnotized by the antics of Shepard Fairey at the ICA these days, so it's good to remember that all around us, all the time, real artists are creating real art that does what art is always supposed to do - challenge, touch, and sustain us. A case in point was last Saturday's concert by the Sarasa Ensemble (above left), with guests Dominique Labelle and Michael Chance, under the auspices of the Boston Early Music Festival (which took the program to New York on Monday). I'm familiar with Labelle and Chance, and thought them an intriguing pairing. The good news was that the Sarasa Ensemble proved equally impressive. The concert was one of the most subtly moving evenings of music I've heard in some time, and provided memories I'll treasure for a good while to come.

Not that there wasn't an interesting aural tension between the three points of this musical triumvirate. The Sarasans (yes, I know that makes them sound like characters from Star Trek) are all about sensitive, intelligent attack, and a daring comfort level with the dissonance that sometimes shadows early music (there were some suspensions between the two violins that I'm not sure ever quite resolved). The vocalists, meanwhile, were operating in two slightly different modes - Ms. Labelle, whose sparkling instrument is as light and radiant now as it was when she was starring in Peter Sellars's Mozart operas twenty years ago, is a kind of power soprano (at least in an intimate setting) who operates within the familiar framework of classical interpretation. Mr. Chance (below right), by way of contrast, is something of a postmodern vocal actor, a countertenor whose voice is less forceful than Ms. Labelle's, but hauntingly gorgeous, and whose real specialty is conjuring mood through intelligent phrasing and highly literate emotion. So to put it bluntly, Ms. Labelle was sun, and Mr. Chance shade, in their first duets, which included exquisite performances of selections from Handel's Teseo and his

The concertmaster was Alison Bury, who also serves as concertmaster of London's Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. She's an elegant player and so were all the others, and there were eloquent obbligato solos by Merton and oboist Richard Earle. This story ran on page F2 of the Boston Globe on 2/3/2004.

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From intimate to grand

By Matthew Guerrieri

Globe Correspondent / February 10, 2009

SARASA ENSEMBLE Timothy Merton, artistic director

Presented by the Boston Early Music Festival

At: First Church in Cambridge, Saturday

CAMBRIDGE - Do performances come in sizes? It's fuzzy math, and bigger isn't necessarily better: Small can mean exquisite, while grand might just be grandiose. Saturday's concert of Baroque repertoire by Dominique Labelle and Michael Chance - along with, making their Boston Early Music Festival debut, local stalwarts the Sarasa Ensemble - was interesting in how, with only four players and two singers, it ranged from polished miniature to operatic extra-large.

The first half featured Handel and Purcell, both composers men of the theater, but the performances were more objective or intimate than theatrical. While Handel's cantata "Tanti strali al sen mi scocchi" provided Labelle and Chance with floridly romantic opportunities, both music and singing were more elegant than torrid. Still, the combination clicked: Labelle curbed her rich soprano to match Chance's softer-edged countertenor, but their sentient, nuanced phrasing gave the music movement and sheen. In three arias from Purcell's "The Fairy Queen," Chance married exemplary diction to a gentle, inward timbre, an approach particularly effective in "See, even Night," evening falling with a preternatural stillness. Purcell's instrumental C-minor Sonata No. 9 (Z. 798) showed similar close focus, both tonally - violinists Christina Day Martinson and Susanna Ogata adopting a wiry, period sound - and formally, harpsichordist Maggie Cole and cellist Timothy Merton quietly framing the music's steady momentum and dancing vigor.

For Handel's first keyboard Suite, Cole created more personal intimacy, the Prelude's loose arpeggiation prompting an exploratory rhythmic flexibility. But in two duets from Handel's "Teseo," Labelle and Chance began to embrace a less reserved style.

Sarasa Reviews

Radiating elegance and eloquence

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff, 2/3/2004

CAMBRIDGE -- Over the last few days the period-instrument chamber ensemble Sarasa has been recording a Bach cantata program with soprano Dominique Labelle and baritone Sanford Sylvan for the British label Avie. Friday night the singers and instrumentalists performed most of the music for the album in a benefit concert to help offset expenses connected with the recording. It was a lovely occasion, and this writer already wants one of the first copies of the CD.

Sarasa is an unusual group. Founding cellist and artistic director Timothy Merton is an American now based in Boston. For seven years he lived in England, performing in many early-music and period-instrument ensembles there and building many friendships.

Sarasa concerts usually feature a mix of Boston's best and finest with prominent English players or American musicians based in Europe. Another remarkable feature of the group is that it regularly performs its programs not only for paying listeners, in the intimate space of the Friends' Meeting House in Cambridge, but also for audiences in hospitals, prisons, and nursing homes.

Sylvan has been feeling a little under the weather but bravely went on anyway to sing one of Bach's greatest hits, the cantata "Ich Habe Genug," though he decided to withdraw from performing a duet cantata with Labelle.

The prestigious harpsichordist Maggie Cole, an American living in England, stepped in with a lively Handel Harpsichord Concerto (in F minor) which she played with charm and dash, often offering twice as many notes as the accompanying instruments.

Sylvan sang the cantata with his usual musical insight, command of technique (breath, legato, coloratura) and responsiveness to text; his voice positively bloomed in the small room. The only sign that he might not be entirely well was an occasional moment of slightly suspect intonation, which must be a first for him, but the intensity of the overall experience was comparable to that of Lorraine Hunt Lieberson's singing of his work with Emmanuel Music on a recent CD.

In the "Wedding Cantata" and in an aria from the duet cantata "Liebster Jesu, Mein Verlangen," Labelle was radiant, singing with a purity of timbre that was never colorless and with a fluent technique across a wide dynamic range, a dancing sense of rhythm, and an unearthly, rapturous steadiness of tone that, like Sylvan's, acquired a glowing aura in this room.